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SUBJECT: THIS WEEK IN ALBANIA, NOVEMBER 9-16, 2007

¶1. (U) The following is a weekly report prepared by Embassy Tirana's local staff to provide political and economic context and insight into developments in Albania. These updates will supplement post's DAR reports and reporting cables.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

¶2. (U) Moving Forward on a National Identity Card: The GOA opened the tender this week for its national ID card and electronic passport project. A key component of electoral reform, its necessity was clarified during 2007 local elections, which were marred by harsh debate over voter lists and identification documents.

¶3. (U) Capacity to deliver the card before the end of next year is among the tender's top criteria, as the GOA has committed to begin issuing identity cards and biometric passports in 2008. The ID card project is being managed concurrently with the modernization of the civil registry, a project funded by the GOA, EU and other international donors (including the U.S.) and implemented with OSCE assistance. Scheduled for completion by August 2008, this will include digitalization of civil records and a comprehensive system of addresses.

¶4. (U) Albania Expands its International Outreach: Foreign Minister Basha announced this week that Albania will expand its diplomatic outreach with six new embassies in India, Estonia, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia and Pakistan. (Pakistan will have a representational office, rather than a full embassy.) He pledged that Slovenia and India would be up and running by the end of the year, and the others operating by the close of 2008. The FM also announced plans to create Albanian cultural centers in Athens, Rome, and London. Another proposal considers attaching diplomats to the embassies of friendly countries in locations without diplomatic representation. Presently, Albania's Foreign Service maintains 46 diplomatic missions abroad.

¶5. (U) Albania Goes Nuclear? PM Berisha's proposal to build a nuclear power plant in Albania attracted attention from its neighbors, who expressed a range of opinions on the possibility. The PM confirmed that the GOA will enter exploratory discussions with the IAEA regarding the construction of a plant. During an Italian-Albanian business conference in Tirana, Berisha pledged to transform Albania into a regional energy superpower capable of exporting safe and cheap electricity.

¶6. (U) The proposal alarmed Greece and Montenegro but interested Italy. Greek EU Parliamentarian Kopa voiced concern while Montenegrin President Vujanovic noted that his government would like more information on such a controversial proposition. In Italy, the proposal was considered "a chance not to miss." The issue is expected to be part of Italian PM Prodi's agenda during his visit to Albania early next month.

¶7. (SBU) Officials Resign Quickly Under Corruption Cloud:

Following reciprocal allegations of corruption, General Director of Prisons Saimir Shehri and his boss, Minister of Justice Ilir Rusmajli, resigned in separate press conferences this week. Local media speculate that Prime Minister Berisha requested both resignations. This marks the first occasion that two high officials resigned immediately over allegations of corruption. Awareness of the problem has been consistently rising since 2005, and the PM has kept up a steady public message that corruption will not be tolerated. Over the last month and a half more than 30 Albanian officials have been put under investigation for corruption.

18. (U) Competition Authority Fines Mobile Operators: Albania's two mobile phone operators were fined this week following an investigation into pricing. The Albanian Competition Authority charged the operators 3.76 million (US \$5.52 million) for abusing their dominant position. As reported in the November 9 Weekly, Albania's mobile prices are some of the highest in the region.

ARTS AND CULTURE

19. (U) This Week in the Arts: Tirana's International Cultural Center will present its annual book fair, with participation of more than 100 publishing houses, graphic studios and distribution companies from Albania and beyond. Albania's National Ballet Theater presents "Sylphide," with music by Herman Lovenskjold and choreography by Albanian soloist Ilir Kerni.

PERSON OF THE WEEK

10. (U) "Little Henri": Little Henri was born September 30, 2007, found abandoned in Tirana. Henri is being cared for by Angel's Cradle, part of the Organization to Save Albania's Abandoned Babies (OSAAB), until he is ready to go to a local group home. During a

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tour of the hospital, Ambassador Withers, accompanied by visiting USAID Assistant Administrator Douglas Menarchik, was asked to name the newest addition to the Cradle. The Ambassador chose Henri, for a member of his security detail who was celebrating his wedding that day. OSAAB, a nonprofit organization housed in Tirana's largest maternity hospital, was begun in 1995 by expatriate and Albanian women who wanted to provide a better start in life for Albania's abandoned babies. Many of these women, as well as some of our locally employed embassy staff, volunteer as caregivers at the Cradle.

WITHERS